

The Politics of Conspicuous Displays of Self-Care

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I became an anthropologist-voyeur of displays of #selfcare last November, after I saw a picture on Instagram of a redheaded woman rubbing a piece of papaya on her face. “I am obsessed with this natural beauty product,” she wrote in the caption. “I rub the skins on my face every morning and I have noticed a HUGE improvement in my complexion. #selfcare.” There are 1.6 million images tagged in this way on Instagram and a few million more on Twitter and Tumblr, most of them posted in the past year. Another typical image, posted in early January, shows a woman in an Aqua-Netted chignon, pageant makeup, and a black lacy bra, posing with a bowl of sweet-potato noodles and a plastic mini-jug of ReaLemon lemon juice. (The self-care part of the scene, we’re given to understand from the caption, is the spirallized potato.)

“Self-care” rose as collective social practice in 2016 alongside national stress levels. Articles about the art of self-care proliferated to the extent that *The Atlantic* ran [a guide to online self-care guides](#). The *Times* Style section published a [think piece](#) on the popularity of the term, which peaked in Google searches the week after the election. Suddenly, one could buy not only a 2017 Self-Care Planner but “self-care temporary tattoos” in the shape of Band-Aids bearing reassurances like “This too shall pass” and “I am enough.” In late November, a group of gamers and programmers participated in an online “[Self-Care Jam](#),” in which they made affirming ephemera for the Web, including a video game intended to teach people to take care of themselves in the morning and a [@selfcare_bot](#) that tweets hourly affirmations (“No matter what, you need to do what’s best for you”).

“Self-care” is newer in the American lexicon than “self-reliance,” but both stem from the puritanical values of self-improvement and self-examination. In 1984, Michel Foucault wrote in “[The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3](#)” *that the notion dates back to the Greeks, noting that in the [Alcibiades dialogues](#), Socrates advises a young man not to attempt political leadership until he has attended to himself. In Plato’s [Apology](#),* Foucault also noted, Socrates claims to have been sent by the gods to remind men to “concern themselves not with their riches, not with their honor, but with themselves and with their souls.” This theme was taken up by Seneca, Epictetus, and a host of early Christian thinkers, and provides the foundation of the modern religious and philosophical imperative to “cultivate the self” or “care for the soul.” More recently, the philosopher Stanley Cavell has argued that the “grand narrative of American individualism,” as it can be traced from William James to Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman, echoes this ancient ethos wherein society is organized around the self-cultivating individual.

Historically, in America, full citizenship has rested on an idea of the capacity for self-care. Samuel A. Cartwright, in his “Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” from 1851, justified slavery by noting a “debasement of mind, which has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves.” The scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson points out in his book “[Barbarian Virtues](#)” *that immigrants arriving to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century were deemed “unfit citizens” because they lacked the “ideas and attitudes which befit men to take up . . . the problem of self-care and self-government.”* The same arguments were made to deny women the vote. Consequently, self-care in America has always required a certain amount of performance: a person has to be able not only to care for herself but to prove to society that she’s doing it.

The #selfcare clickholes that have emerged in the last eighteen months are an

extreme manifestation of this tendency. Never before have people like @instastefyb been able to provide such immediate photo evidence of their [face-mask rituals](#). (“We wake up, flawless,” the caption reads, followed by hashtags like #beauty, #selfcare, and #sorrynotsorry.”) The tone of this endlessly renewing digital archive reflects an essential change in the performance of self-care that has taken place in the past fifty years or so. After decades of disuse, the term was repopularized in the seventies and eighties by people of color and queer communities—this time as a gesture of defiance. In 1988, the words of the African-American lesbian writer Audre Lorde became a rallying cry: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” In this formulation, self-care was no longer a litmus test for social equality; it was a way to insist to a violent and oppressive culture that you mattered, that you were worthy of care. Lorde’s quote remains the mantra of contemporary #selfcare practitioners. “Many of us are poor, many of us are working ourselves into early graves,” the writer Evette Dionne, referring to black women, said in an [interview](#) with *Bitch* magazine last year. “And so saying that I matter, that I come first, that what I need and what I want matters I think is a radical act because it goes against everything that we’ve been conditioned to believe.”

In a similar spirit, after the [mass shooting](#) at a gay night club in Orlando, L.G.B.T.Q. people across the world started posting selfies under the hashtag #queerselflove. One of the most popular recent self-care memes is the graphic quiz “[You Feel Like Shit: An Interactive Self-Care Guide](#),” which was created by Jace Harr, a trans man. Framed as a questionnaire, the survey ranges from simple questions (“Have you eaten recently?”) to those especially relevant for people facing oppression and trauma: “Do you feel triggered? Are you feeling dissociated, depersonalized, or derealized?” The week that [Philando Castile](#) and [Alton Sterling](#) were killed, a young black trans man named Devin-Norelle (@steroidbeyonce) posted a mostly [naked self-portrait](#) with the comment

“Healing is self-care is self-love, self-indulgence, and self-preservation, because sometimes we need to be reminded that #BlackIsBeautiful.” When I asked about the photo, Devin-Norelle told me that making self-care public is “informed by resistance toward the forces that tell me that people like me shouldn’t be.”

A friend who is a religious ethicist recently pointed me to the philosopher Harry Frankfurt, who, she wrote, suggests that “in order to care about the things and people we love, we have to care and love ourselves, because we have to endorse the cares and loves that we have.” “This isn’t selfishness,” she added. “It’s self-endorsement, toward wholehearted loving.” This argument sounds similar to the now popular online slogan “Self-care isn’t selfish,” but it has a different orientation and focus. When you endorse yourself as both vulnerable and worthy, especially when that endorsement feels hard, you can grant that same complex subjectivity to others, even to people whose needs and desires are different from your own. At its best, the #selfcare movement offers opportunities to see and care about vulnerability that’s unlike yours.

The irony of the grand online #selfcare-as-politics movement of 2016 is that it was powered by straight, affluent white women, who, although apparently feeling a new vulnerability in the wake of the election, are not traditionally the segment of American society in the greatest need of affirmation.

Naturally, the movement has become a market. Further investigations of Papaya Girl showed that her picture was #spon, or sponsored—in this case by a beauty company. In fact, #selfcare is often #spon. When I looked closely at another post, of a blogger having coffee and enjoying a “[smooth and balanced](#)” moment, I saw that it was paid for by McDonald’s to promote its new “smooth and balanced” coffee blend. A survey of one recent morning’s Instagram and Pinterest posts turned up [an image by West Elm](#) showing a kitten napping on one of the company’s quilts, an ad for [Schick Hydro Silk razors](#), and a link to an article on [five-minute “self-care moves”](#) sponsored by

eBay, with hyperlinks to essential oils and books of Mary Oliver poetry available for purchase.

All of this might serve a rather different notion of American individualism than what Audre Lorde had in mind. As [Laurie Penny recently wrote](#), for *The Baffler*, the risk of promoting individual self-care as a solution to existential anxiety or oppression is that victims will become isolated in a futile struggle to solve their own problems rather than to collectively change the systems causing them harm. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that beneath the face masks and yoga asanas, many of the #selfcare posts sound strangely Trump-like. “Completely unconcerned with what’s not mine” is a common caption. So is “But first, YOU,” and the counterfactual “I can’t give you a cup to drink from if mine is empty.” I recently spotted another hashtag right next to #selfcare: #lookoutfornumberone. The image was an illustration of a pale, thin girl with a tangle of wildflowers growing from the crown of her head, reaching up with a watering can in one hand to water her own flowers.